

Cairo

From Edge to Edge



Essay by
Sonallah Ibrahim

Photographs by
Jean Pierre Ribière

AUC PRESS PHOTO BOOKS

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The American University in Cairo Press

*To Catherine,
Olivier, and Florence*

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Cairo

From Edge to Edge

Sonallah Ibrahim

Egyptians have grown accustomed to explaining their misfortunes, when things go wrong or when there is a crisis, by recalling that the original builder of Egypt was a pastry maker. The reference to Egypt here is actually a reference to Cairo. As for the pastry maker, many explanations have been given for the reference (some of which are quite appropriate) based on the immediate meaning of the word: that is, someone who makes pastry, the quality of which is determined by its crispness. Other explanations depend on a different use of the word, current in the countries of North Africa, from where the original builders of the city came. There, the word is used to designate someone of extreme fragility and softness. The third set of explanations seem to be very modern: they refer to artfulness, guile, and duplicity. But history books deny that Gawhar al-Siqilli, the magnificent military commander who conquered Egypt in the name of his patron, the great Fatimid caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, exhibited any of these qualities. On the contrary, he was known to be a dedicated and industrious man whose integrity was never in question.

Gawhar entered Alexandria peacefully and proceeded south toward the capital that had been built by Ibn Tulun exactly one hundred years earlier, at the foot of the Mugattam hills. He set camp to the north and, on that same night, laid the foundation of the new city that he decided to call 'al-Mansuriyya' after the caliph's father, who quickly settled in it and changed its name to that which the city has carried for more than a thousand years.

Many stories have been told about this name, the most credible of which recounts that as al-Mu'izz gave his commander the order to march on Egypt, he instructed him to build "a city that would vanquish the world." But the Vanquisher (the literal meaning of al-Qahira, Cairo) never vanquished anyone but its own people, for invaders from all places and of all races succeeded one another in it. Apparently this did not affect its ability to survive and to grow and to become one of the largest cities in the world—and one of the most impossible.

Today, it is a bustling city that knows no sleep by day or by night, characterized by the dynamism of its streets, the product of its thirteen million inhabitants—who during the day become sixteen million, thus comprising one quarter of Egypt's total population. They mill around doggedly amidst packed traffic jams, overcrowded buses, and shrieking horns, beneath flyovers, between huge residential towers crowned with satellite dishes, within inhabited graveyards from which TV antennae protrude, around popular shops with foreign names, in discotheques where the young dance to the latest western songs, inside traditional hammams where naked giants scrub and roll the outer layer of skin into long black threads, near churches and mosques adorned with high minarets decked with deafening loudspeakers that overlook roofs covered with all kinds of trash, or in the open air, surrounded by piles of garbage or rummaging through them for something that might supplement their modest incomes, as others wade through the scum talking on their mobile telephones.

The population of Cairo increases by one hundred thousand per month, though many are killed by disease and pollution. Despite that, more than a million people are forced to dwell in flimsy shanty-towns or graveyards while two million of the city's apartments remain closed. Whereas the majority lives below the poverty line, the increase in daily expenditure runs parallel to the programs of economic restructuring dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

Of course, there are new factories in the suburbs of the city: batteries, aluminum products, ready-made clothes, cosmetics, ceramics, chewing gum, soda water, tissue paper, cleaning products. And the media call this an "economic boom." But Egyptians awaken to Japanese alarm clocks, wash with French soap, shave with English razor blades, brush their teeth with American toothpaste, eat Danish cheeses, smoke Marlboros and drink Cola, write with French ball-points on Finnish paper, listen to Japanese or Taiwanese radio sets, take German buses, and watch Korean TV sets.

Two hundred years ago, the scientists of the French expedition noticed that there were no streets in Cairo, in the conventional sense of the word. Rather there was a number of alleyways describing circles and turns along which buildings mushroomed. Actually, the irregular lines of the streets betray the plunder to which they have been exposed. People would choose a patch of land on which to build, with no regard as to whether this would block the street. This led to the birth of many a dead-end alleyway.

Moreover, traffic on the streets was extremely difficult: many European travelers wrote of the thousands of pedestrians thronging narrow, meandering streets, the deafening shrieks of galloping mule-drivers, and the chimes of water vendors. Meanwhile women and children would sit, in absolute silence, in the midst of all this hubbub, risking being run over or stepped upon.

Today, despite the signs of modernity, Cairo seems not to have departed from that moment. Traffic is chaotic and the traffic policemen seem powerless to stop the cars with their hand signals, after the red traffic lights have failed to do so. The sidewalks have been invaded by showrooms for cars and small stands. Pedestrians have few designated places to cross, and when they can locate one, nobody respects it. Traffic jams are constant and are not restricted to rush hours, or seasonal vacations and feasts, but can happen at any time. Cars necessarily collide, not only because the streets are too narrow but because the lack of parking lots leads to double and triple parking, and because there are no functioning traffic lights that anyone respects, and because of the dazzling headlights that everyone uses all the time, and because of the frustrated and exhausted bus drivers who are weary of passengers, pedestrians, and life itself, and because of the drivers of minibuses who use drugs to help them deal with all these pressures so they drive recklessly and stop anywhere, and because of the youngsters who have been given cars to drive with the same recklessness and who—like the bus drivers—have no concern for what may happen to the vehicles since they themselves have never paid for them.

But the most amazing thing is the attitude of the people themselves, who seem indifferent and unwilling to stop this cancerous development of the city or to safeguard its order and its cleanliness. Some say that this is a typically Egyptian attitude: not the filth and the thick skin, but the ancient history of centralization due to the existence of the Nile and the rigid irrigation system. The irrigation system is synonymous with central organization, where every-

one submits to an absolute power that alone holds the reins of initiative and possible action. This situation has created a general atmosphere of dependence, laziness, and passivity, and has thwarted the potential and incentive for initiatives.

With the advent of the 1952 revolution, the state continued its monopoly in initiatives and instituted elaborate plans for total development. But our neighboring cousins, of common Semitic origin, were displeased with these plans and quickly moved to abort them through armed aggression. The country was therefore forced to delay many housing and service projects. Hundreds of thousands left their destroyed cities and rushed to the narrow valley that constitutes only 3 percent of the land of Egypt but contains 96 percent of its inhabitants. Cairo was their preferred destination because it was the focus of everything: half the national industry, one-quarter of the medical profession, one-third of the pharmacies, and approximately two-thirds of the means of transportation and communication, telecommunications, television, the distinguished cinema industry, and the theater.

Then came the period of the 'Open Door' policies, which was marked by complete chaos. The elite seemed impotent, indeed unwilling, to confront the situation. It would have been possible, for example, to encourage Cairenes to use bicycles besides public transportation, but instead they continue to hurl hundreds of cars onto the streets with no concern for the pollution that has now reached the same level as that in Mexico City: the highest in the world. Moreover, they resort to short-term solutions that demand enormous sums of money: flyovers with narrow entrances and exits from and to narrow streets; new subway lines; extensions of water and sewerage systems. These solutions and extensions quickly become insufficient, given the rise in population. So new extensions are made with the help of yet more external and internal borrowing. It is a never-ending vicious circle, with no impact, because the ancient city has come to a point at which no project will solve its problem. On the contrary, it can only aggravate it and continue to baffle experts of all kinds—both the World Bank-style technocrats who call for transferring the administrative capital in order to strip the city of its main attraction and the romantics who refuse to abandon the historic capital and call instead for controlling it, closing it, and then emptying it of half its inhabitants.

Many blame the Open Door policies for the passive situation that plagues not only Cairo but the whole of Egyptian society and the changes that have

befallen it of late. For it was during this period that the greatest plunder of the country's wealth occurred, a plunder in which the technocrats, together with the brokers, the contractors, and the middlemen, participated. It was because of these policies that the country's international debts sky-rocketed to amounts equal to those deposited in Swiss banks by the elite. The gap between classes increased, education and services suffered, and human values were readjusted; heroin reemerged, having disappeared from the country after the end of World War II. Statistics compiled in 1995 show that there are several billionaires, one thousand millionaires, and two million unemployed in Egypt. Two percent of the sixty-two million inhabitants eat imported ice cream and yogurt, the price of each being sufficient to feed an entire poor family for a whole week. They drive luxury cars, the cost of each being equivalent to the cost of three public transportation buses or the construction of four thousand economy housing units. And in 1993 alone the country consumed the equivalent of two hundred million dollars in hard drugs.

But there are others who seek a more profound analysis and produce a different set of explanations, grounded in what social scientists have called social mobility among the classes, involving the use of the social ladder in both directions. This social mobility, they show, started during the forties and has accelerated during the last two decades at a rate unprecedented in the recent history of the country.

Such social mobility is said to be the result of the expansion of education, which led to the dismantling of barriers between classes. It was given yet another significant push with the land reclamation laws, nationalization and sequestration policies, the increase in taxes, and the acceleration of agricultural and industrial development. The economic and social situation of the landed aristocracy, industrial capitalism, and import/export businesses (which the state had inherited) deteriorated. In contrast, the economic and social levels of large segments of land tenants, industrial workers, and artisans improved. This process accelerated during the seventies as a result of the Open Door policies, together with both internal and external labor migration.

Just as immigrants from rural areas to the city had done before them, the new rising sectors brought with them their own modes of life, behavior, and habits. Thus they walked the streets of the city in their gallabiyas from which mobile telephones dangled, they bought the latest models of cars and went to great pains to imitate the dwindling upper classes, and they dominated the city

through their wealth and imposed their own songs. Should we therefore be surprised at the impotence of the elite—which represents them—to control the city, whose organization it is unwilling to undertake and whose filth it does not see?

One can discern Cairo's Citadel from any vantage point, even through the permanent veil of dust and waste. How can the eye mistake the two elegant minarets with the dome in between? But the Muhammad Ali Mosque is only the tip of the iceberg of this unique architectural conglomerate that was constructed over centuries and whose history, so closely related to that of the city, has become symbolic of its very being.

The oldest parts of the Citadel were constructed eight centuries ago by Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, who through his victories during the Crusades became a symbol for the resistance to foreign occupation. The actual building of the structure was executed by Qaraqush, one of his aides, who became a symbol for pointless despotism. Between them, perhaps, they sum up the essence of Egyptian history.

Moreover, the Citadel marks the beginning of a unique period: five and a half centuries during which power was held by several dynasties of Mamluks—the slaves, imported from Asia Minor and central Europe, who became warriors and princes. The Citadel also witnessed the end of this period at the hand of the famous Muhammad Ali, the first ruler chosen by the Egyptians themselves and imposed on the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul.

After several bloody confrontations that put an end to many of them, Muhammad Ali invited the remaining Mamluks—twenty-four princes and beys and four hundred of their followers, aides, and confidants—to a banquet at the Citadel on March 1, 1811, which was attended by several thousand dignitaries. After they had drunk their coffee, smoked their water-pipes, and listened to music, they prepared for departure. They stood and saluted Muhammad Ali and formed a procession lined by two regiments of guards. The procession descended from the Citadel along a narrow passageway that led to the gate of Bab al-Azab. The vanguard rode at the head of the procession, followed by the chief of the police force, the governor, and his cortège. Here the music came to a halt, and suddenly the great gate of Bab al-Azab thundered shut and was bolted on the outside, blocking the passage of the Mamluks. Meanwhile, the guards mounted the rocks overlooking the passageway, took position along

the walls above it, and opened fire on the Mamluks from above and from behind. It was a complete massacre from which no one escaped.

Muhammad Ali added a palace, a mosque, army barracks, and storage houses to the structure of the Citadel. Those who succeeded him followed in his footsteps: the British—the last of the foreign powers to occupy Egypt (and for the shortest period: only seventy-four years!)—constructed a military prison inside the Citadel that continued to receive occupants from among revolutionaries and politicians until the departure of the last British soldier from Egypt in 1956 at the hands of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, the first Egyptian ruler known to the country in over two thousand years. The last occupants of this small prison were the assassins of Sadat in 1981. In 1983, the prison was closed and transformed into a police museum.

The prison comprises a number of small cells constructed along the sides of two open passageways. In four of these cells have been placed life-size figures that represent prisoners from various historical periods, distinguishable from one another by their dress and the signs that have been posted beside the doors. The signs for the Mamluk, Ottoman, and Muhammad Ali periods represent a historical falsification, since the prison was built only during the 1880s. Only one sign corresponds to historical truth: that which announces “A Prisoner from the Modern Period,” represented by a figure dressed in modern clothes, with eyeglasses and a book in hand. This is the same cell I occupied some time ago.

It was two years after the last British soldier had departed from Egypt. In the middle of the night, we went up to the Citadel, the site that conferred authority on those who ruled Egypt. But we were not triumphant conquerors, nor were we defeated conspirators or voyeuristic tourists. We entered, one after the other, through a small aperture in a huge wooden gate that may have been the ancient Bab al-Azab, then we were assigned to the different cells.

This was only the overture, for the city was big, and not short of prisons: one was just meters away and was aptly named (at least until the seventies when it was demolished) “Prison of Egypt”; the others were scattered around the northern and southern edges of the city. These prisons present their political occupants with elaborate reception ceremonies that are prepared with great care, in whose production many specialists participate and which are attended by distinguished state representatives who usually sit around an oblong table that overlooks the outer courtyard of the prison where the guests await in the

corner. The reception ceremonies then begin: the guests proceed between two lines of guards armed with sticks that increase in size until they become cudgels, at which point the guest is already naked, heavily wounded, unconscious—or in many instances dead.

Near the prison there is a spacious terrace that overlooks Cairo and from which a spectacular view is visible through the dust that envelops it: to the left are the remains of Fustat, the initial heart of the city built by the Arabs after the conquest of Egypt in 639; straight ahead and to the north extends the old city with its thousand minarets, announcing, besides the call to prayer, the various historical periods that succeeded each other within the city: the Fatimid, the Mamluk, and the Ottoman.

The oldest minaret dates from the year 877. Built by Ahmad Ibn Tulun, it is characterized by its conical shape and its external stairway, reminiscent of the minaret of the Samarra Mosque in Iraq, Ibn Tulun's place of origin. Most of the minarets belong to the Mamluk period, with its elaborate ornamentation. As for the two slim, spear-like minarets of the Muhammad Ali Mosque in the Citadel, they belong to the dry Turkish style. There are another two elegant minarets that tower—since the fifteenth century—not on a mosque but atop Bab Zuwaila, one of the gates of Old Cairo, though they actually belong to the famous mosque of al-Mu'ayyid, whose story encapsulates the entire Mamluk period.

Like all other Mamluks, al-Mu'ayyid was brought to Cairo by the slave vendors, when he was still a twelve-year-old boy, where he was sold on its markets and bought by the Mamluk sultan Barquq, who schooled him in reading, philology, the arts of war, and wrestling. Thus he came to participate in the ongoing conflicts between the Mamluk princes. He ended up in a prison attached to Bab Zuwaila where he was put in a dirty hole in the ground with hands, feet, and neck chained to the wall. During this crisis he vowed that if he were to become ruler of Egypt he would build a mosque and a school on the site of the prison.

It seems that God did respond, and he took over the sultanate in 1412. Within three years of his reign he began to fulfill his pledge. He started by demolishing the prison, then his men began raiding the people's homes to remove the marble necessary for the construction of the mosque.

Five years later, the story came to a familiar close: he discovered that the princes wished to depose him and appoint his son, Ibrahim, so he put poison

in the latter's dessert. Not a year had gone by before he joined his son and was buried by his side, under the dome of the mosque. Only Bab Zuwaila, whose history is no less bloody, remained erect. It had been the very heart of Old Cairo and a focus of life and death within it: upon it hung the bodies of the crucified thieves and rebels, and into it sterile women hammered nails in hope of a God-given child.

Perhaps the social mobility theory offers the best explanation for the transformation, deterioration, and amelioration that Cairene neighborhoods have undergone in the aftermath of the constant shuttle of the population between ascent and descent: Shubra, which grew up around Muhammad Ali's palaces, has lost its elegance and collapsed under the weight of the crowds and joined the ranks of the workers' neighborhoods to its north; eastern Abbasiya has blended in with the alleyways of Old Cairo; the island of Zamalek has been invaded by shops, cars, and dirt, and submerged under flyovers; Dokki has expanded into the agricultural land surrounding it, thereby creating a new neighborhood that has become a symbol for the nouveaux riches, the fun-seekers, and those in pursuit of imported commodities. As the central streets of the modern city—which during the forties and fifties had been the most elegant and posh—deteriorated and lost their allure, other rich neighborhoods in Mohandiseen, Heliopolis, Nasr City, and Maadi gained in elegance and wealth.

The social mobility theory may also provide an appropriate explanation for the abrupt experiences of my childhood and adolescence, which first hurled me from the east of Cairo to its west, via the heart of the old city, and then returned me—after several decades—from its west to its uttermost east. However, during this 'mobility' I was constantly on the 'edge,' never beyond it.

My mother was an eighteen-year-old wife to a man of sixty. She also came from a lower social stratum, for she had been his first wife's private nurse. Perhaps this enormous age difference, and the fact that she was very religious, besides her natural tendencies, all contributed to propelling her quite rapidly, when I was only six, to separate herself from our world before she would separate herself from the family.

Until my early teens, my father and I constantly moved from one house to another, from one neighborhood to another, in a relentless search for some form of stability, in harmony with our constant economic deterioration. Hence together we rolled down from eastern Abbasiya with its bourgeois atmos-

phere, where respectable civil servants lived, to the city's edge, near Bab al-Futuh, one of its ancient gates. Our house was exactly on the edge, at the end of the tramway shed, facing a Jewish school that was adjacent to a convent school with a skating rink. Beyond that was an indefinite area that led to the British army camps and the Dominican monastery—the refuge of Father Qanawati, one of the unique personalities in modern Egyptian history—and an open space that was used for the celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday. There was a flower vendor a few steps away from our house, then a square named after the king, who would pass through on various occasions in a red car: the royal color.

More important than the king was Urabi, the owner of the famous café in Husayniya. He had been one of the well-known *fitiwwa* (initially a bouncer-type, whose main occupation was the protection of the people of his neighborhood in return for their money, respect, and submission) at the turn of the century before he retired and opened a water-pipe café, frequented by notable personalities such as Naguib Mahfouz, who may have started his journey of ascent right here; a long journey that later took him to al-Fishawi café in the heart of Fatimid Cairo, then the Opera café on its edge, before he moved to the heart of the modern city.

As for the heart of the old city, it started after a walk down the narrow Husayniya street, at Bab al-Futuh. Between this gate and Bab Zuwaila extended the city's center of economic and commercial activity during the Ottoman period. However, Husayniya was never marginal; its important role began during the eighteenth century thanks to two kinds of inhabitants: the Sufis, who belonged to various Sufi orders that were established around the mosque of Sheikh al-Bayumi, after his death in 1770; and the butchers, who settled in the neighborhood after the construction of a new slaughterhouse to the north and whose profession and weapons qualified them to lead the resistance against the French occupation.

On the edge of this neighborhood, I came to know many moments of grief during my childhood: when I was obliged to remain silent until my father finished listening to the afternoon news on the black radio set before I could race my red car between the bathroom door and the dining room door; when that car disappeared; when the magician used to spread out his props and begin blowing fire from his mouth and then start collecting money from the audience in his tambourine, promising to resume his tricks, only to proclaim that

what he had collected was not enough and so pack his things and leave without showing us the snake come out of the egg (a scene that constantly recurred, so that I have yet to see this marvel).

My red car was not the first or last thing to disappear from our house. I grew used to discovering—upon my return from school—that a piece of furniture was missing, until the day when all the living room furniture disappeared. That was where the maid used to sleep, and I sometimes with her, listening to the stories of Ummina al-Ghula and al-Shatir Hasan. In this living room I had invented my first games on the designs of the carpet with simple props, no more than matchboxes and newspapers: with the first I would make trains and cars and with the second boats, ships, and armadas.

As for the tram, we would go on a delightful afternoon ride from the square to the quiet al-Dhahir Street, lined by interlocking trees. The tram would cut through the branches of the trees, then the street ended and the tram would take a turn onto the spacious square and slow down, coming to a halt in front of the famous mosque of al-Dhahir Baybars, the real founder of the Mamluk state, who defeated the Tatars and the Crusaders and around whom popular epics have been strung. Through the huge arches of the mosque one could discern the red and blue clothes of boys and girls playing in its lower garden. The tram would then resume its course and circle around the mosque onto the narrow street that had once been one of the branches of the Nile and the western limit of Fatimid Cairo.

On the trip back, along the same route, we would cross al-Khalig Street then the tram would suddenly swerve to the right, and the row of houses that had run parallel to us on the left would disappear. Ahead of us lay a dark, vast space that frightened me; I would cling to my father and he would cover my naked knee with his warm hand. Moments later, my eyes would grow accustomed to the dark and begin to make out the spacious square with the massive mosque at its center. The tram would circle round the mosque and dart onto al-Dhahir Street. I would lean my head against the wooden barrier behind me to enjoy the extraordinary speed as my father, hand on his flying tarboosh, closed his eyes in the ace of the wind.

A few years later, I would race the tram and try to jump on from the left side to prove my ability to trick the ticket collector, exposing myself to the danger of slipping underneath it, or colliding with the other tram coming in the opposite direction. That was when we had finally settled down in an old two-story

house owned by a Turkish lady, whom my father married for a while. We were continuing our descent, and we would always stop at the edge. The Turkish house lay near Sayyida Zeinab Square—the saintly lady with the renowned *mulid*—adjacent to an open-air movie theater to whose third-rate seats I learned to sneak to enjoy films by Layla Murad, Sabah, Muhammad Fawzi, Anwar Wagdi, Isma'il Yassin, Tarzan, Esther Williams, and Laurel and Hardy.

Our move to the southwest edge of Sayyida Zeinab was short-lived; we quickly headed for the north, in a straight line (were we trying to return to the beginning?) to Azbakiya and Clot Bey, the neighborhood that was transformed, under the British occupation, from the seat of the wealthy to the center of prostitution (at least until 1949, when prostitution was officially prohibited), thus confirming the strong relationship between two important strata in society. As usual we stopped at the edge: for a change we overlooked al-Faggala, a respectable neighborhood with beautiful churches, printshops, and bookstores. By now our situation was quite difficult: the house we occupied was located in an alley that was itself called 'Between the Alleys.' Its houses were narrow and dark, with no source of electricity, only gaslight.

But the edge of Husayniya is where I discovered the various scents of life. The smoke of boilers and ovens in the early morning would reach me as I walked indifferently to school, treading a colorful pebble pavement just like those in the Azbakiya gardens and the Zoo. Orange fruit and jasmine huddled over the walls of villas. Musk and amber prepared by a sheikh clad in a brocade caftan: he dips a reed pen into his mixture and etches obscure signs on the bottom of a gas lamp, in a futile attempt to read the future. The smell of old books that shakes my very being to this day every time I come across a similar smell—I used to follow that smell from one street to another, searching for an obscure shop that sold old paperback books teeming with the heroes of the time: the honorable criminals and the nice thieves who took from the rich to give to the poor.

And then the scent of woman.

I must have been five or six. We used to have a dark, elderly cook who covered her head with a white kerchief and chain-smoked all day long. My father used to allow her to smoke in his presence and was deliberately casual with her, which upset me. One day she appeared with another, younger woman enveloped in the usual black *milaya*, her face covered with the traditional *burqu'* that revealed the eyes and was suspended with a shiny brass disk over

the nose, covering the mouth with a net-like fabric. There was a beautiful, mysterious feminine scent that emanated from her. Did she have a dark blue bottle of Soirée de Paris, or did that belong to my mother? A mysterious conversation took place between the three of them during which the woman's white, young thigh was uncovered, all the way up to its soft, shaven end. The strange thing was I could not remember the details of her face, but I recalled her thigh as I fondled the remains of torn books (which I had most probably torn), among which was a novel, with a red glossy cover. For some reason, their conversation disturbed me: was it my father's undivided attention toward this woman, or was it the revelation I witnessed?

I remember how, upon my father's orders, I happily accompanied her (the presence of a child with a woman bestows legitimacy on her movements) to her house in Husayniya, enjoying the mysterious scent that emanated from her with the *burqu'* covering her face and the *milaya* tightly enveloping her body, accentuating its roundness. I hurried by her side, deliberately close to her in order to enjoy her scent to the utmost. That was how I came to penetrate into Husayniya through a maze of narrow alleyways, some of which still harbored the remains of the ancient gates or the broad, stone benches built in front of shops for the owners to sit on and deal with their clients' business. What characterized this trip, however, was that the usual smells of mud, filth, and olive presses were overtaken by my companion's smell.

This smell accompanied me long after our journey of descent carried me to the north, when for the first time we crossed the Nile, to be closer to the university. Here again we were immediately on the edge. Our house had a spacious garden on a street full of similar villas, but that was only the façade: the back yard of the house overlooked a popular café in the heart of Dayir al-Nahiya Street, the name always given to the main street in Egyptian villages. The city had started expanding and was already consuming the villages. From that side came flies and the smells of filth, mud, led meat from the grill of a *kufta* vendor right beneath our bedroom window. But the front entrance of the house led to the Urman Gardens, full of plants and flowers. Further along was the University.

Hence one was showered with an array of scents, all the way from the Urman Gardens to the University auditoriums on the opposite side. During that time, it was usually the daughters of bourgeois families who could afford to pursue their university education, and it was quite easy to sniff the most

splendid perfumes inside and outside the auditoriums, especially at the Faculty of Arts cafeteria. Other than that, the university was boring and invited absence. From the Faculty of Arts cafeteria the road was paved to the exciting world of adulthood, and eventually to the famous Citadel prison, across the Nile, in the opposite direction of course.

In front of the University main gate there was—and still is—a long, wide street lined by the trees of the two gardens of Urman and the Zoo, leading in a straight line to the wide sidewalks on the banks of the Nile, adorned with flowerpots and overlooking a few houseboats. Vendors of peanuts, lupine, roasted corn cobs, jasmine garlands, all spread out along the shore for lovers to consume, while the voice of Umm Kulthum or Muhammad Abd al-Wahab, and later Abd al-Halim Hafiz, echoed from a distant radio. All this has now disappeared, and the beautiful shore has been transformed into a large dock for touristic cruisers, while the sidewalk has become a parking lot for private cars. As for the voices of Umm Kulthum and Abd al-Halim, those have given way to boisterous, loud, rhythmic music accompanied by superficial lyrics almost devoid of meaning. And as for the lovers, they have either ascended to the luxury hotel lobbies or descended to the back streets. In both cases they have abandoned the game of romance for more pragmatic considerations.

How often I have traversed this sidewalk with grief gnawing at my very bones, accompanied by Abd al-Halim in full sympathy, with songs fraught with love, pain, frustrations, and mysterious longings emanating from a burning desire to ascend, or a profound sorrow over the actual descent.

Neither ascent nor descent were related to my next move—after a brief stop in Zamalek—to the utmost east of Cairo to the suburb known as Heliopolis, built on the edge of On, the oldest pharaonic city in Egypt. I was still at the edge, at the meeting point between a popular neighborhood with rural origins (discernable in the intertwining alleys) and a bourgeois neighborhood with well-planned avenues lined with trees, villas, and buildings not more than three or four stories high.

This suburb was also known as Misr al-Gadida, New Cairo, because it was truly new in every respect. The Belgian baron Empain, who designed the neighborhood at the turn of the century, had tried to avoid the pitfalls of Old Cairo: the streets were wide and abundantly verdant and public transportation was available in the form of an elegant white tram that was actually called 'the White Tram': it began its course in Abbasiya and floated like a breeze on the

right side of the wide, shaded al-Khalifa al-Ma'mun Street, alongside the British army barracks.

By the time I arrived in Heliopolis, the White Tram had disappeared, the British had left, and internal migration had increased. The neighborhood began to expand in three directions, with three new tramway lines now deferentially called the Metro. During the succeeding years I followed, with horror, the constant assault on the gardens and the sidewalks that made way for small commodity stands or parking lots for the increasing number of cars. The ground floors of the distinguished, old, spacious buildings were transformed into all kinds of shops: hairdressers, interior designers, dry cleaners. With trepidation, I watched this uncontrollable hurricane as it slowly approached my immediate neighborhood.

There was a modest old two-story villa on a street near my own occupied by an old couple with their lazy, unemployed, forty-year-old son. I had grown accustomed to seeing the old couple in the afternoons and evenings seated peacefully on their balcony, eyeing passers by through the branches of a flame tree. This was their daily routine until the day one of the hawks laid eyes on the villa. The old couple refused to abandon their home and they resisted the temptation of the rocketing sum of money offered, until it had reached seven digits. Then one day their son came with a truck and forced his parents into it. The next day, we saw him driving a luxury car. A few days later, they began demolishing the villa and digging the foundations of a huge apartment building. Before construction was over, the ground floor had been enveloped in sheets of glass and transformed into one of the famous American fast-food chain stores. The youth of the neighborhood would climb the ten steps that led to the entrance in order to consume the usual recipe of burger and Cola as they stared out like half-wits through the glass windows at passers-by, elated at their own ascension and their contribution to the modernization of the country. Soon, as had been expected, they were joined by hard drug pushers.

This was the signal to charge: soon the first floor of another villa on the same street was transformed into a video game store, and a large sign appeared on the next villa announcing a new company for imported satellite dishes and mobile telephones. The street became crowded with double- and triple-parked cars, under which piles of garbage and filth accumulated. The procession of ascent continued: somebody seized the first floor of an old building whose sturdy and spacious structure betrayed the Belgian baron's architectur-

al designs. He blocked the door to one of the apartments with unpainted cement, tore down the walls to a room overlooking the street and implanted a door with a huge neon-lit sign that announced a new fish restaurant, significantly named 'Jaws.' He then extended wires of colored light bulbs along the street to attract attention to his creative accomplishment. These lights (together with the air conditioners and the gigantic refrigerators) required a special generator that worked day and night. The repertoire of aromas was further extended by the dominant smells of fish, frying oils, and barbecue, all of which have a remarkable ability to penetrate hair, clothes, and furniture.

Needless to say, the occupant of the flat above the restaurant was the most affected by these changes, given the laws of physics when applied to the movement of smells and sounds. He was an old man who had been the author of dictionaries and encyclopedias—hence he was one of the descending. The man succeeded in obtaining a court order to close down the restaurant and we all gave a sigh of relief. However, not one week had gone by before the 'shark' had succeeded in obtaining a counter court order, annulling the first. This farce went on for quite a while before the restaurant owner obtained the final court ruling to his advantage. From that day, we grew used to seeing the old author leaving his apartment at night, dressed in a pink silk house-gown that had lost its shine over white pajamas, and in a pair of sandals, walking slowly and contemplating the ground in a daze, to the end of the street. Then he would disappear. No one ever found out when he returned to his apartment, for he would only be seen again as he was leaving the following evening.

The natural way for any writer to begin the day is to grab pen and paper or to sit at the computer—if, like myself, he is very modern. But many Cairene writers prefer a more pragmatic beginning, capable of uplifting the creative powers: Tahrir Square is their point of departure. The importance of this square does not lie in the fact that it constitutes the center of the city, or that it is surrounded by strategically important buildings like the Hilton Hotel, the Egyptian Museum, the Mugammaa (which comprises 1,400 offices occupied by 30,000 employees who deal with 60,000 people per day), and the American University. Nor is it important because at its center stands an empty statue base erected twenty-five years ago after the death of Abd al-Nasser, which the Egyptians have yet to determine a personality to occupy; nor because, according to a popular joke initially targeting one of the Arab kings, it is

the space used by the prime minister to distribute the national budget: he stands at the center of the square and hurls the national budget into the air, taking what lands on the ground for himself and giving what remains in the air to the people.

For one thing, the importance of the square lies in the fact that it leads, just a few meters from the underground Metro station, to the café where the Nobel writer Naguib Mahfouz was accustomed to sit, every morning, to read the papers and have coffee. This is also the only café in the area that has designated a dark corner, with a curtain, where one can order beer. Just a few steps away begins—or ends, depending on the direction one is taking—an ancient street that during the monarchy witnessed the drunken soldiers of the British occupiers and their allies, the aristocratic night clubs, the high society ladies, and the most luxurious stores for clothes, furniture, and jewelry, before it came to carry the name of Talaat Harb, the pioneer of national industrialization during the thirties and forties. Now the many shops that line the street contain the scum of imported goods beside bottom-of-the-line local products, the result of drug-money laundering attempts. But this is also the street that used to harbor the Riche café.

This café, of Greek ownership and atmosphere, was the meeting place for intellectuals during and after the sixties. In the mornings it would be filled with retired judges and distinguished civil servants escaping their homes and their wives' reminiscences about the long lost years, to have some coffee and cake as they reminisced about their own lost years.

The ritual of breakfast would be repeated at midday as journalists and artists awakened. In the evening, beer bottles and Egyptian brandy would appear and the place would be packed, especially on a specific day of the week, designated by Naguib Mahfouz for an open discussion with his friends and admirers. At least, this used to be the case. For here we are remembering the golden age of this café, during the sixties and seventies, when it used to bustle with the most vital literary debates: committed literature, social realism, and the absurd, when small literary journals, some of which never saw the light (or did for a short while) would be concocted at its tables, when film scripts and plays would be discussed in small groups, and when many were taken to detention camps or prisons because of a word or a joke recorded in a secret report, written at a neighboring table.

This is how it became a symbol for intellectual small talk that actually mat-

ters very little. A well-known poet, who writes in the Egyptian dialect, reflects this general ambiance in a poem that begins: "Long live the intellectual at the Riche café/ Hurray, hurray, hurray/ Stuck up and sleazy/ A bag full of words/ With a few empty ones and a few other terms/ He fabricates quick solutions to problems."

This may also explain why today, and for the past ten years, the café is surrounded by planks of wood, as it is said to be undergoing complicated renovations that have yet to be completed, the reason for which is unknown and around which several rumors have arisen. Naguib Mahfouz has been obliged to relocate, with his admirers, to a cafeteria on the nearby island of Gezira on the Nile, where he is guarded by two lions made of bronze, two of the last and most important remaining symbols of modernization under Khedive Ismail. As for the other regular customers of the Riche, who found it difficult to cross over to the other side of Tahrir Square, or to pay the expensive prices at the cafeteria on Gezira, or to deal with the Israeli presence at the kind-hearted and generous Nobel laureate's open discussion—all these have withdrawn to a small alley behind the Riche, to a popular café called al-Bustan, frequented by drivers, doormen, and neighboring shop vendors. From there, they have spread into what has come to be known as 'the Triangle of Horror.'

This triangle begins at al-Bustan café, extending north on one side to the old Grillon restaurant, which continued to deteriorate until it was taken over by an active Iraqi, who had been displaced by the American attack on Iraq. He renovated it, and transformed its garden into an elegant, covered cafeteria that serves beer at Riche prices. Quickly, it became the meeting point for a group of writers, painters and journalists. From the restaurant extends another line toward the east, leading to the rooftop Odeon bar, which remains open all night, thus allowing the theater crowd to drop in. At this point begins the third arm, on the return trip to al-Bustan café.

The principal center of the famous triangle is the Atelier, full name the Atelier of Writers and Artists, a membership club in a small two-story building surrounded by a small garden, with several exhibition halls for the plastic and musical arts, the largest of which is used for a weekly literary debate. During such debates, literary critics will eulogize a collection of poems, thereby guaranteeing themselves one of two things, or both: a set space (in exchange for an attractive fee) on the literary page edited by the eulogized poet in one of the daily papers, or a regular coverage of their own activities and publications.

This place, that has received every single Egyptian or Arab writer or artist, witnessed glorious days during the sixties and seventies, before alcoholic beverages were deleted from its menu under the pressure of fundamentalism. But the disappearance of alcoholic beverages did not affect the legitimacy of the place, which during recent years has witnessed some historic events, the latest of which was the meeting of around one thousand intellectuals after the armed attack on Naguib Mahfouz, and their decision to organize a march in protest, which did not materialize because the police, always on the alert, besieged them, detained some, and dispersed the ranks of those remaining.

From whichever direction the writer tries to penetrate this triangle, he or she will arrive in the midst of storms and burning flames that confer upon the area its well-deserved description of the Triangle of Horror. Further, it is armed by a broadcasting service no less powerful than CNN. Like CNN, it has all-day coverage of the various literary and artistic battles, with their accompanying pacts, besides a summary of the daily news: that is, what even the opposition papers have not published with regard to the secrets of political events, the latest political scandals, the astonishing deals, and the dubious projects, all topped with the necessary dressing of marital betrayals and sexual relations. This broadcasting service is supported by an invisible express-mail service: should you begin your trip from al-Bustan café, within minutes, when you arrive at another focal point of the triangle, you will find an angry colleague ready for battle, after news has reached him of what you said moments ago concerning his literary honor, or that of his wife.

However, the world of the Triangle of Horror is not always this serious: there is room for entertainment and pleasure. By this I do not mean just a couple of drinks, or participation in harmless gossip, for the atmosphere within the triangle is besieged by a permanent sexual fever. Those who bring their manuscripts, or their gossip, for discussion or comments are also in search of a perennial goal, that may not exceed listening to a lengthy monologue by a member of the opposite or the same sex on the latest theories of aesthetics, sufficient to exhaust the listener before the speaker. Usually, such conversations terminate by the turning of the page to another theory in the same field, or by resuming the conversation in a more intimate place, where obscure barriers worthy of the attention of Freud's disciples are discovered, thus hurling the parties concerned back to the point of departure, the heart of downtown.

It would be a mistake to believe that intellectuals are the main players in this

arena. This may have been true some time ago when downtown Cairo was the stronghold of foreigners and the upper classes. Then came social mobility, which brought with it new kinds of profiles. When in 1957 foreign companies and banks were nationalized and the public sector was established, the new, ascending executive managers chose the downtown area for their work and residence. Because the public sector was established under a rigid economic system, it immediately gave rise to a parallel class of traffickers. The Open Door policies then allowed for the accumulation of spectacular wealth that was the result of smuggling and black market money, whose owners were known, during the seventies, as the 'Fat Cats' and who have now grown to become whales and crocodiles. It is they who packed downtown Cairo with appliance, clothes, shoe and pastry shops. In the evening, you see them in front of their shops, with enormous bellies, relaxing from the day's battles; they are joined by foreign company and tourist business representatives, easily recognizable by their uniform-like clothes, their colorful ties, their shaven heads and their quick step in search of commissions.

For a split second, I did not recognize the lady when she opened the door. I looked at the apartment number, and then at her face. At that moment, I recalled the features I had known for years, almost completely hidden behind the usual folds of the veil.

I had not seen her since she and her husband had left for one of the Gulf countries, where he worked as a legal consultant, while she continued her work as a teacher. She was around forty-five, a member of a family well known for its role in social reforms: her mother was one of the Egyptian women who had fought for equality between men and women and who had led demonstrations, during the thirties, calling for unveiling: that is, the removal of the old Turkish yashmak (the aristocratic counterpart to the popular *burqu'*) imposed by the mores of the landed aristocracy. You can therefore imagine my amazement when I was received by this woman I had always seen in modern dress clothed in religious garb.

Here we must distinguish between two kinds of garments, falsely identified with Islam, that did not exist in Egyptian society prior to the seventies: the *bigab* (head cover) and the *niqab* (complete head and face cover except for the eyes). The latter is far more fundamentalist and is related to an extremely reactionary understanding that considers revealing any part of the female body

against true religion. Hence it is made of thick, plain material that completely covers the face, or provides two small holes for the eyes and descends below the chest. This is complemented by a loose-fitting garment from head to toe, plus a pair of gloves. The *bigab* is much milder and covers only the head and arms, but not the face. Beyond that, there are many variations on the *bigab*, depending on the woman's attitude: there are those who consider that make-up is against religious teachings, and there are those who do not see a contradiction between the *bigab* and painted lips, cheeks, or fingernails and toenails.

I started contemplating my friend, who wore no make-up at all; she had covered her head and was clad in a long garment covering her arms, her legs, and her feet. I noticed that she had significantly gained weight. She detected my thoughts and said that the lifestyle in the country where she worked allowed for no entertainment or activity except cooking and eating; there were only two movie theaters, which showed Indian films to the large Indian constituency; as for television, it was packed with preaching and boring programs and soap operas that had been stripped by the censor of anything having to do with normal life.

In talking to her, I discovered other aspects of her life: she had problems dealing with both her students and colleagues in the Gulf, who like to think of Egyptian women as loose, both because of their relative freedom and through jealousy of the success Egyptian women have with Gulf men, given this relative freedom. Her contract was due to expire in a few months, and there was no chance for renewing it, or finding another job, because work regulations were very strict and opportunities had diminished in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Her husband had another two years before the end of his contract. Hence she had to choose between two equally difficult options: returning to Egypt alone, or remaining with him, unemployed. The first option imposed a harsh separation on both of them, especially since they had no children, while the second would deprive her of approximately half their income, besides which she would not be able to stay home without work when she had spent her whole life working and active in the outside world.

She talked to me through a frowning face, placing her hand over her head and complaining of a constant and acute headache. Meanwhile, I looked at her clothes and compared her present appearance to that of only a few years ago, around the beginning of the seventies, when she, and others like her, paraded in their miniskirts without offending anyone. Soon I too caught her headache,

as I started thinking of this steadily advancing monster that snatched friends and acquaintances, one after the other.

Several months went by after this meeting, when one day she called me, as soon as she arrived in Cairo on a short trip. So I went to see her. Once again, a surprise awaited me. The woman who greeted me was slim and dressed in modern clothes that revealed her arms. More importantly, her hair was uncovered and nicely done, and she wore light make-up on her face. She smiled as she announced that she had signed another contract in that Gulf country, which would allow her to remain with her husband until he terminated his own.

I asked her about the headache and she declared it had ceased. How? An Indian doctor in the Gulf told her that the *bigab* was responsible for her headache. He had given her the choice, in order not to subject her sinuses to the effects of air-conditioning, between wearing it night and day and renouncing it completely. She then added, laughing: "I chose the second solution after I became certain that true Islam does not impose the *bigab* on women."

I kept my suspicion to myself concerning the change in her attitude. Many women had removed the *bigab* without the need for an Indian doctor, especially once it had achieved its desired effect. One thing was certain: the Indian doctor was not behind her slender body or her high spirits. After I myself had tasted life in one of those Gulf countries, it was not difficult for me to imagine the dire circumstances that led her to concoct a means by which to defend herself, a means that would allow her to insert herself into a strange society, to gain its acceptance and guarantee of work, especially as this strategy did not collide with dominant principles and values. In this respect, she is not much different from the American girl in Hollywood who removes her clothes in order to tread the world of the stars.

But the situation does not require a Gulf country in order to discover the *bigab*. You can still accede to it in Europe, through feelings of impotence and frustration in face of an advanced civilization. Indeed, this can also occur in the heart of Cairo, without setting foot outside one's home. This is exactly what happened to another of my women friends, of the same age. She was the model of the contemporary, enlightened young woman and she looked forward to an outstanding future in research. But she fell in love and married young, and soon became the mother of three children, besides the husband! Gradually, the gap between herself and her own plans increased, then the gap between her and her husband did the same. On the threshold of her fifties,

she was exhausted, both physically and psychologically, and was dominated by a feeling of acute frustration. As she sensed life trickling between her hands, she found herself incapable of any adventure on the level of social utility or sexual fulfillment in order to compensate for what she had missed or in order to rediscover herself. The repertoire of the dominant social traditions, not to mention bureaucratic regulations (she needed her husband's written permission to travel anywhere outside the country) would not allow her that. The only way out was to 'withdraw'; she selected, from among the different forms of withdrawal (madness, suicide, drugs, etc.), the safest and most socially acceptable: she repressed her emotions, or at least concealed them. However, this remained a less dramatic decision than her Christian sister's choice of the monastery.

This does not mean that the *bigab* is related to mid-life crisis. Indeed, many discover it quite early. Take, for example, a young, middle-class girl as she leafs through a fashion magazine (most of which are expensive Gulf publications), then sees the rich, upper-class university girls in their expensive, attractive clothes, and then walks past the shops that offer designer clothes at incredible prices. Does not the *bigab* represent an easy economic solution, in its simplest form, a sort of acceptable attire for both the society and its men?

Economics is but one of the many contradictions of which a young Egyptian girl becomes aware, as she debates the question of 'proper behavior.' One of the television channels, for example, calls for commitment to the principles of religion, and to wearing the *bigab*; it gives space to those who attack woman's work and call for her return to the home to look after her husband and her children. At the same time, other channels broadcast strange programs in which women appear half naked. In the midst of this confusion, the *bigab* seems like a strategy of self-defense and a protection against two potential dangers: madness and prostitution.

Indeed, this confusion is not restricted to the young woman, for the man is the principal victim. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it is the man who wears the *bigab*. He has inherited the position of the master in society but failed to practice it: as much as women's accomplishments in the field of education and public life threatened that position, it was threatened too by men's inability to adapt to a society in constant 'mobility' on all levels; a society that has yet to decide upon a 'code' acceptable to the majority that would secure him a safe life.

Take a look at what the Egyptian man has been subjected to over the past four decades.

He shouldered many sacrifices during the struggle for independence, until the evacuation of British troops in 1954. He shouldered others when they returned two years later, accompanied by the Israelis and the French, and until they departed once more. Moreover, he shouldered the burden of the modernization project that was adopted by the middle class, under the leadership of Gamal Abd al-Nasser, with complete faith in the philosophy proposed by this class, as regards industrialization and social justice. He was elated with the now available housing, work opportunities, social security, health care, free education for himself and his children, content to have obtained his basic needs through the institutions of the public sector, unconcerned about luxuries or the restrictions placed on his freedom of expression.

Once again, he shouldered his share in the catastrophic effects of the 1967 Israeli aggression, and during the war of attrition that followed it, then the war of 1973, which he considered the end of the line and a herald for the fulfillment of old dreams in a better future. But suddenly the same ruling elite announced that the politics of industrialization, planning, and the public sector, were all responsible for his sufferings, that the only chance for development lay in the 'open economy,' 'privatization,' and the advice of the World Bank.

Once again, he put faith in the new philosophy proposed to him, and he regained hope when he saw the markets flooded with imported goods, even though he could not afford them. He seemed willing to ignore the rise of daily living expenses and the corruption of the state apparatus, the drop in the level of education and the shrinking social security, the increasing gap between the classes and the escalation of dependency on the West, as he awaited the promised, bright future. But years go by, bringing only more promises of suffering and disillusionment.

Are we then to be surprised if this man should choose withdrawal from society, for both himself and his family, covering head and face, and retreating to a simpler image of the past that is easier to understand, with promises of happiness, peace of mind, and pleasure that await him not only in paradise but in the many small mosques that have spread profusely, where the disciples of an old blind sheikh, the protégé of the United States (which continues to harbor him for the day when it may have to deal with a long-bearded government) are

very active, where the most reactionary ideas are diffused and the most false information concerning correct religious teachings circulate (like the story of the small Satans that are born as a result of intercourse in which Satan himself participated because the couple did not perform certain rituals), where fanaticism is fueled against the Copts, who constitute approximately one-fifth of the population, where women are talked into wearing the *bigab* and staying at home, an image in complete contradiction to woman's image during the sixties and seventies, not to mention even more archaic times.

During the fifteenth century, around the year 1470, Sultan Qaytbay—one of the most lustrous Mamluk sultans, perhaps the only one who was forced to take over the sultanate and wished voluntarily to give it up, more than once—prohibited women from wearing a head cover, veil, or silk kerchief decorated with jewelry over their heads. He was at once very religious and very strict, and he ordered the men of the *muhtasib* (market supervisor) to beat any woman seen with a head cover in the market. The women, panic stricken, would go out with heads uncovered, but would still wear the forbidden veil at home.

The films of the fifties and sixties of this century, repeatedly broadcast on television, show women (despite the scissors of the censor that occasionally intervene to meet the conditions of our desert neighbors) unveiled, or in miniskirts, showing off their graceful figures and their femininity. But this is an image from bygone times and appears to belong to a different century. Today's woman stumbles as she walks, often leaning with her hand—or entire body—against the nearest wall, moaning under the suffocating heat of her voluminous clothes that cover a body bloated by unhealthy foods and a life devoid of physical exercise and exposed to all kinds of illnesses; most of this life is spent seated in front of the television, whose screen is dominated by Sheikh Sha'rawi and his like for hours on end, during which they proclaim all kinds of rules, followed by silly soap operas or commercials that announce the pleasures of life in elite palaces and call for the purchase of more than one television set, under the slogan: "One for the living room and one for the bedroom."

True, the *bigab* and the lifestyle that comes with it strip women of their humanity, restrict their ability to actively participate in production, and impede the progress and development of the entire society—indeed render it backward, or at least disfigure it. But does not the denuding of the Hollywood girl represent a violation of her humanity, and a surrender to a society of fetishization? In my opinion, both cases are two sides of the same coin, whose value

will not change except under a global condition that respects the rights of human beings, insures a just distribution of wealth, and compensates the people of less developed countries for all the pillage and draining of material and spiritual resources to which they have been subject.

From the Citadel, to the east and across the neighborhoods of the old city with its Islamic and Coptic monuments that extend into a low depression, one can see the Pyramids across the Nile, announcing another unique architectural conglomeration, produced by a material religion that was based on life. Unlike the three monotheistic religions that emerged in the Arabian desert, it had no fantastic mythology or epic God. Rather, it was a wilderness of myths, conjoined by one idea: the struggle against death.

However, this is the religion that invented, three thousand years before Christ, the idea of the birth of the pharaoh from the 'Holy Spirit,' when he was actually the son of a human mother. The god Amun would visit the queen, disguised as her husband, the king, and he would impregnate her. When the royal child was born, his mother would present him to the king not as his own son but as the son of God. The interest of this myth is not simply that it was used to dominate the people, but that the pharaohs themselves, as is usually the case, came to believe the mythical story.

For a whole century, this people—who, before any other human community on the face of the earth, invented writing and the calendar year, laid the foundations of astronomy and mathematics, used the metrical and digital systems, developed the arts, the monetary system, the postal system, glasswork, and weaving—who, more than any other human community ancient or modern, elevated the status of women, and punished those who polluted the environment by death between the teeth of the crocodiles and by depriving them of an afterlife—this civilized people carried stones that were transformed into sarcophagi for pharaohs who were devoured by an obsession with grandeur and a fear of death. For four months every year, when the floods left them with no work, three or four million men were mobilized to transport the stones to the Nile, then sail them up to a special paved route, where they would be molded or mounted with great skill. They worked just like the robots that populate science-fiction films.

But they were only a human community that grew around an expanse of land that stretched for a million square kilometers, most of which was barren

desert, which is why its members congregated along the banks of the river that provided them with life and taught them order and obedience, agriculture not violence, writing not war. The sun tamed them and made them value life and its continuity. This led them to produce records.

Such is the condition that created a god out of the pharaoh, and a principle out of realistic thought. The afterworld, which these great artists invented, was nothing but a copy of our own realistic world. The exploitation that they suffered for several consecutive centuries seldom prompted them to rebel. The first rebellion was in the year 2181 BC, against the rich, most of whom were among the clergy, and whose corpses were thrown by the thousands into the Nile. This was the only occasion during fifty centuries on which the Egyptian peasant rebelled, the only rebellion for which we have the records of the defeated alone, for at that time the clergy had a monopoly on writing.

In modern times, Egyptians rebelled and took to the streets on five occa-

sions during a century and a half: twice against the French in 1798 and 1800, twice against the British in 1919 and 1946, and once against the monarchy in 1952. The rhythm has accelerated in recent decades, for the country has witnessed spontaneous uprisings by an angry people in 1968, 1975, 1977, and finally in 1986, when the police troops—responsible for oppressing uprisings—themselves rebelled.

More than once I deserted my home city, where I experienced the long and short ends of freedom. More than once I left it, embittered, enraged, determined never to see it again. More than once I abandoned it, haunted by its Citadel with its minarets, only to return again, meek and humble. To this very day, I cannot explain my inability to live in any other city on the face of the earth.

Translated by Samia Mehrez

Introducing the Images

Jean Pierre Ribière

Facing Bab al-Hadid—Cairo's central railroad station, today encircled by flyovers—the colossal statue of Ramesses II seems to smile in the middle of the infernal daily traffic. Is this because he has just heard about his imminent removal to the desert edge of the city? This kind of question does not seem to trouble the commuters hanging out of the doors of the overcrowded buses. They hurtle along Cairo's downtown streets, lines of dusty baroque buildings, the dream of Ibrahim Pasha, the khedive architect of the nineteenth century. On the sidewalks, the crowd presses along in front of shops overflowing with the useless products of contemporary consumption. In a surprise fashion show, strolling women, in tight-fitting clothes or veiled from head to toe, go window-shopping. On a street corner, a shoe-shiner watches and sucks on his cigarette. A woman clad in black is sitting on the ground in the general indifference, selling tissues. Almost everywhere coffee shops are full of men day-dreaming in front of television sets, talking about who knows what sort of business with exaggerated gestures, or reading newspapers while smoking *shisha* water-pipes.

At the same time, in Fatimid Cairo, a bird takes flight with a fluttering of wings that resounds in the courtyard of a silent mosque. A man prays in the shadow of a pillar worn out by time. The call to prayer echoes from the tops of the minarets without drowning the uproar of the radios, of children shouting, of the workshops and the pedlars. On the avenue that cuts through a popular district, the activity inside a workshop is reflected by mirrors hung on a wall. Abstract figures, resulting from the testing of car paints break the monotony of peeling walls, covering an electoral bill with a redeeming graffiti: Allahu akbar! On the shelves of an old coffee shop covered with mosaic, *shishas* await the customers. The television broadcasts a sermon by the very popular Sheikh Shaarawi before the surrealistic appearance of an announcer who looks like a goddess of Love.

As usual, the potters' ovens spit out their bitter smoke on the town. Nothing seems to trouble the passing of days. Nevertheless, some stall-keepers are

invading the pavements surrounding Sayyida Zeinab Mosque. A funfair and a religious feast, the *mulid* of the prophet's granddaughter will transport the crowds into ecstasy throughout the nights of sparkling electrical lights.

In Zamalek, the lions of Qasr al-Nil Bridge are still on guard. Of the splendor of the past, there remain some villas and some spacious avenues where cars are triple-parked and where one may still come across a glittering Rolls-Royce. Young couples couldn't care less for the horse races and high society receptions. If the banks of the Nile no longer have the aristocratic charm of the gardens of the past, they still provide a shelter for these lovers' promises. On the river, fishermen from out of time throw their nets into dark waters and await a miracle. Crossing the old iron bridge popularly believed to have been designed by Eiffel, a bread vendor, like an acrobat, balances a tray of *baladi* bread on his head, breakfast for the workers on construction sites.

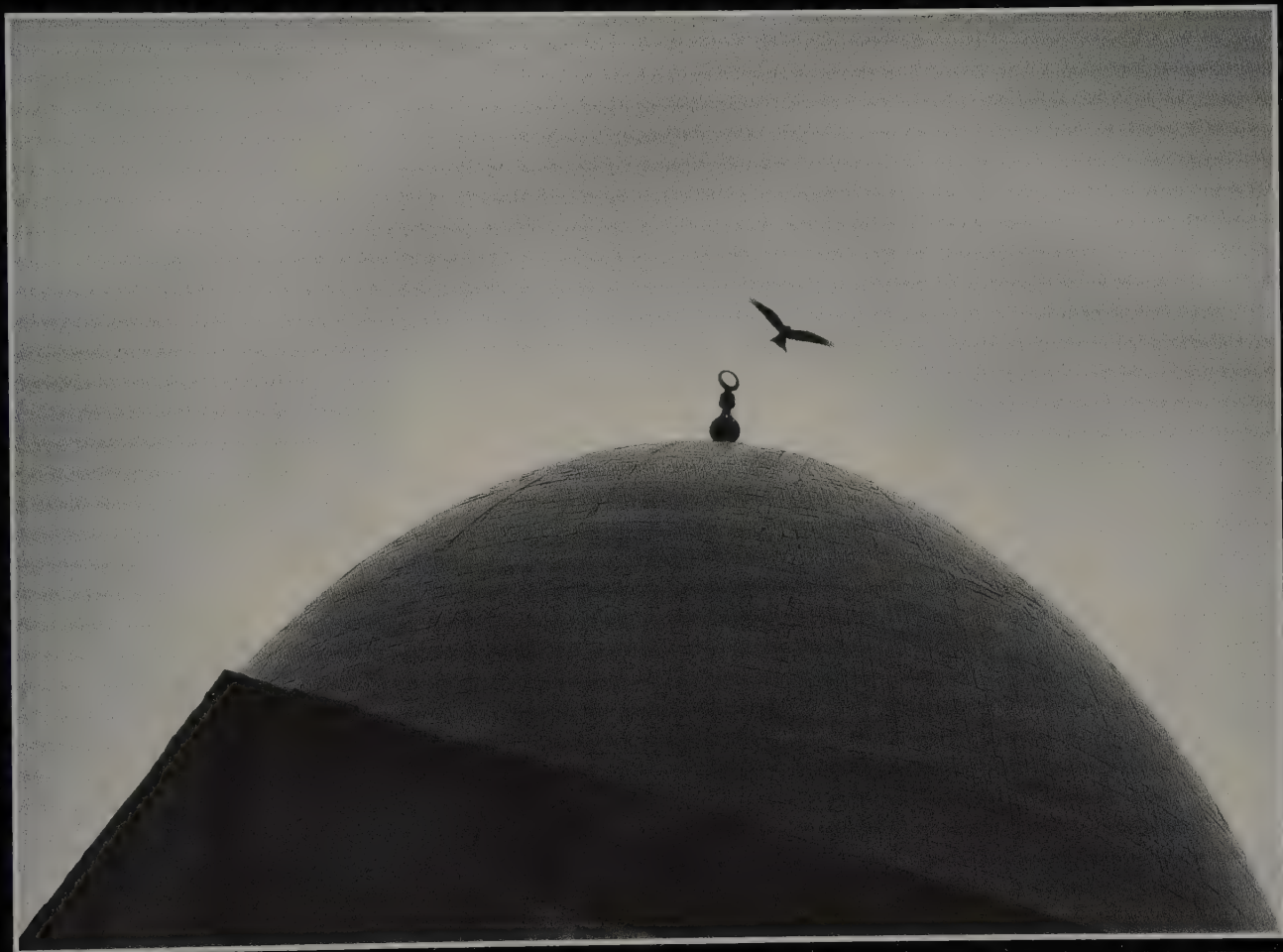
Elsewhere, west of the Nile, Arab League Street, lined by glass and cement buildings, extends across Mohandiseen. On the roofs, a forest of satellite dishes open the doors of the 'global village' to Egypt. Dealers' shops line up impeccably to present the latest makes of imported cars: the Jeep, devourer of the desert, the Mercedes for businessmen, the BMW for shoppers! The entire fast-food line: McDonald's and other idols of the day contest for space in luxurious shops under the eyes of giant, indifferent Marlboro cowboys that crown the fairground. In this 'virtual' universe, pedestrians crossing the streams of cars look as though they have just emerged from an electronic game. Cairo does not fear anachronism. A few hundred meters away there are shanty neighborhoods: blocks of cement, more or less informally built along the old irrigation canals that have been transformed into streets. Their inhabitants, normally of modest background, begin a new life here.

Over there, along the nearby desert route, billboards propose the gardens of Eden of the coming millennium to the rich citizens who dream of clean air, a stone's throw from the Pyramids.

One Thousand Days And One Night

Likewise, if today you were to visit Midaq Alley you would be surprised to find the coffee house, the barber's shop, even the small boutique, obstinately closed, all just as they were.

Mahfouz par Mahfouz, interview with Gamal al-Ghitani



Al-Nasir Mosque



The children's swing — Salah al-Din Square



The blind man and his guide — Salah al-Din Square



Sabil — Mu'ayyad Mosque



The prayer — Mu'ayyad Mosque



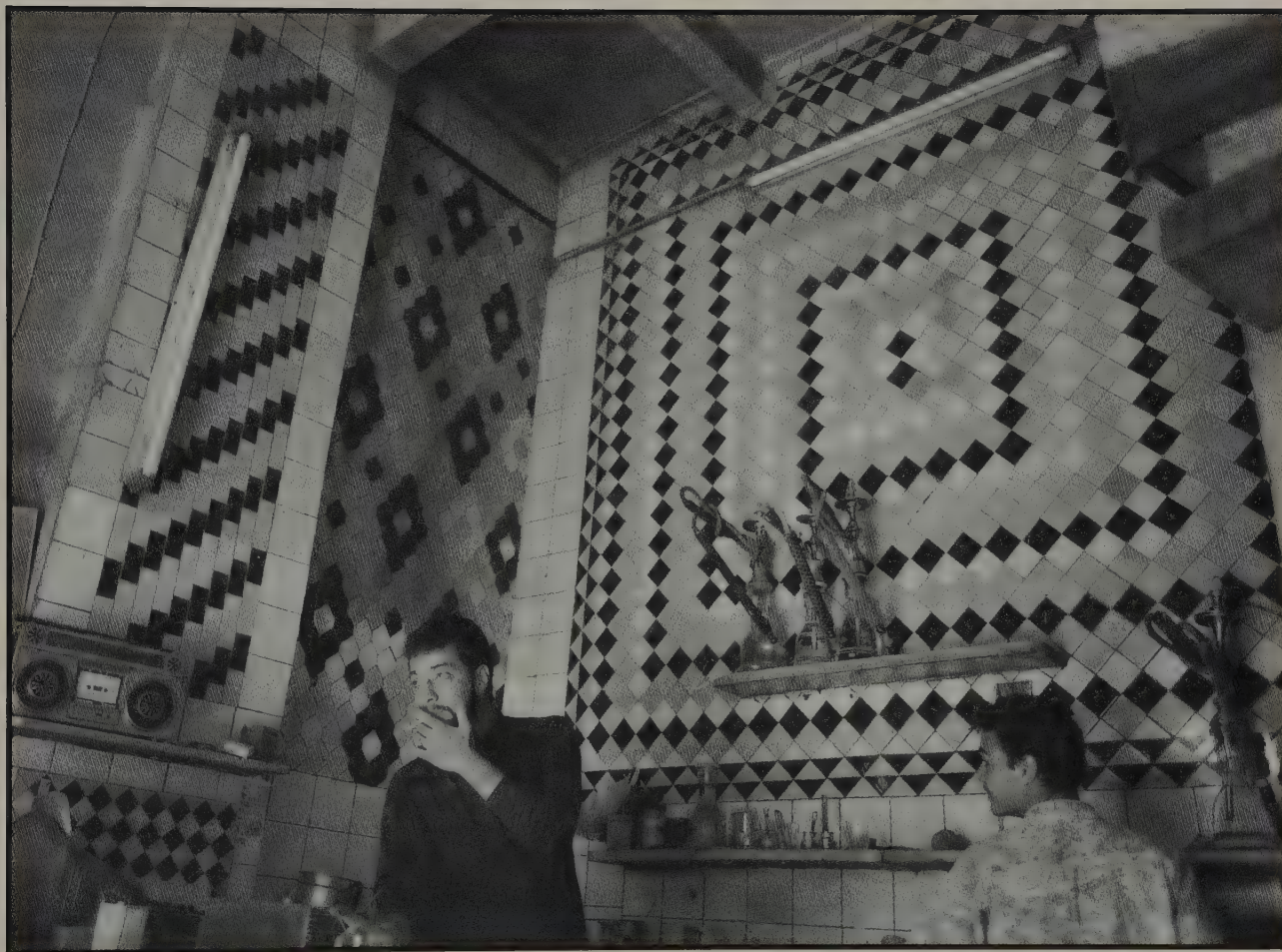
Soccer — Sharia Qasaba



Mirrors — Bulaq



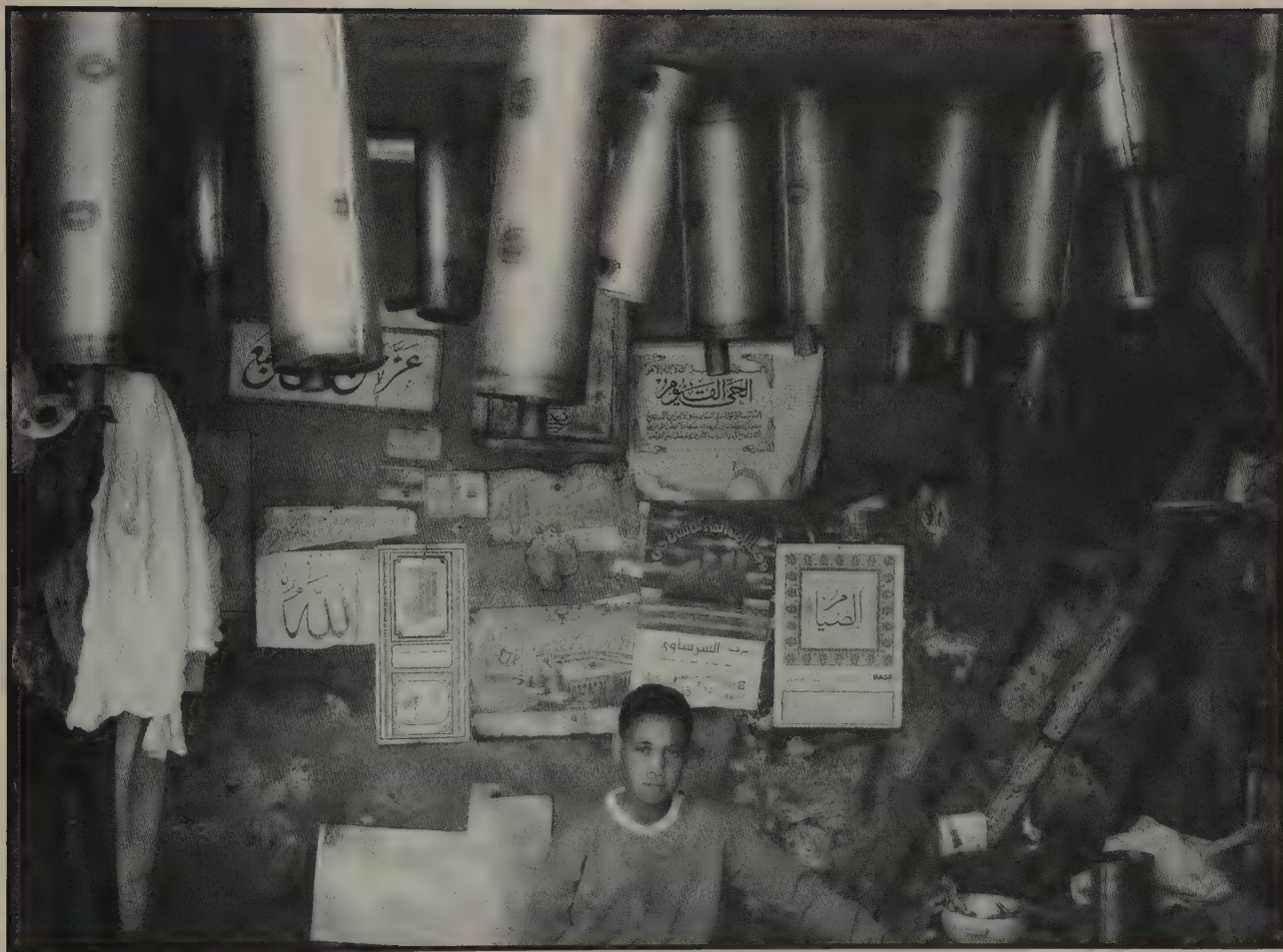
Sheikh Sharawi on television



Tea, coffee, *shisha* — Munira



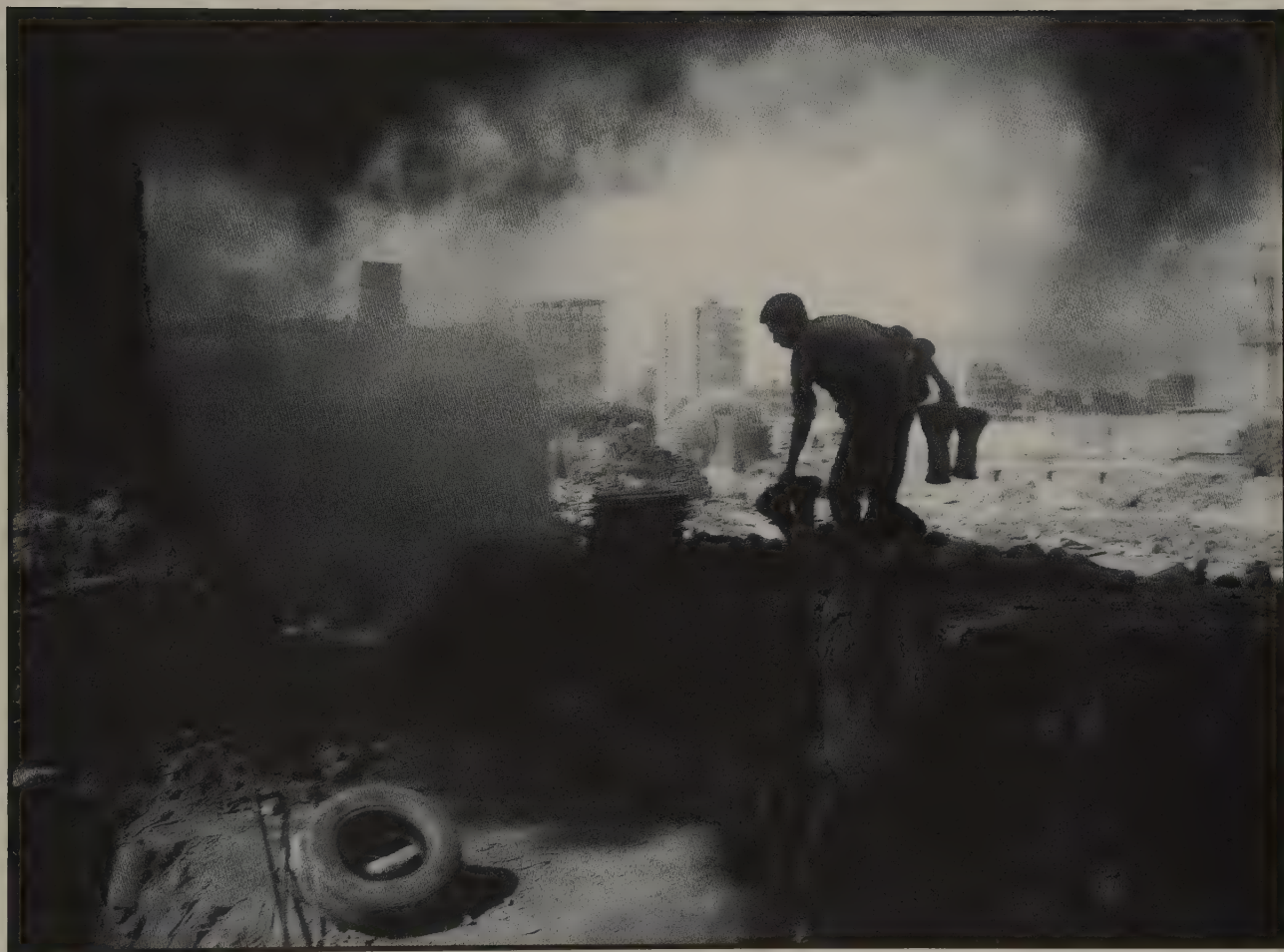
Election banners — Bab Zuweila



Exhaust pipes — Imbaba



The aluminum worker



Potters' area — Old Cairo



Ancient slaughterhouse area — Sayyida Zeinab



Merry-go-round keepers



Sayyida Zeinab *mulid*



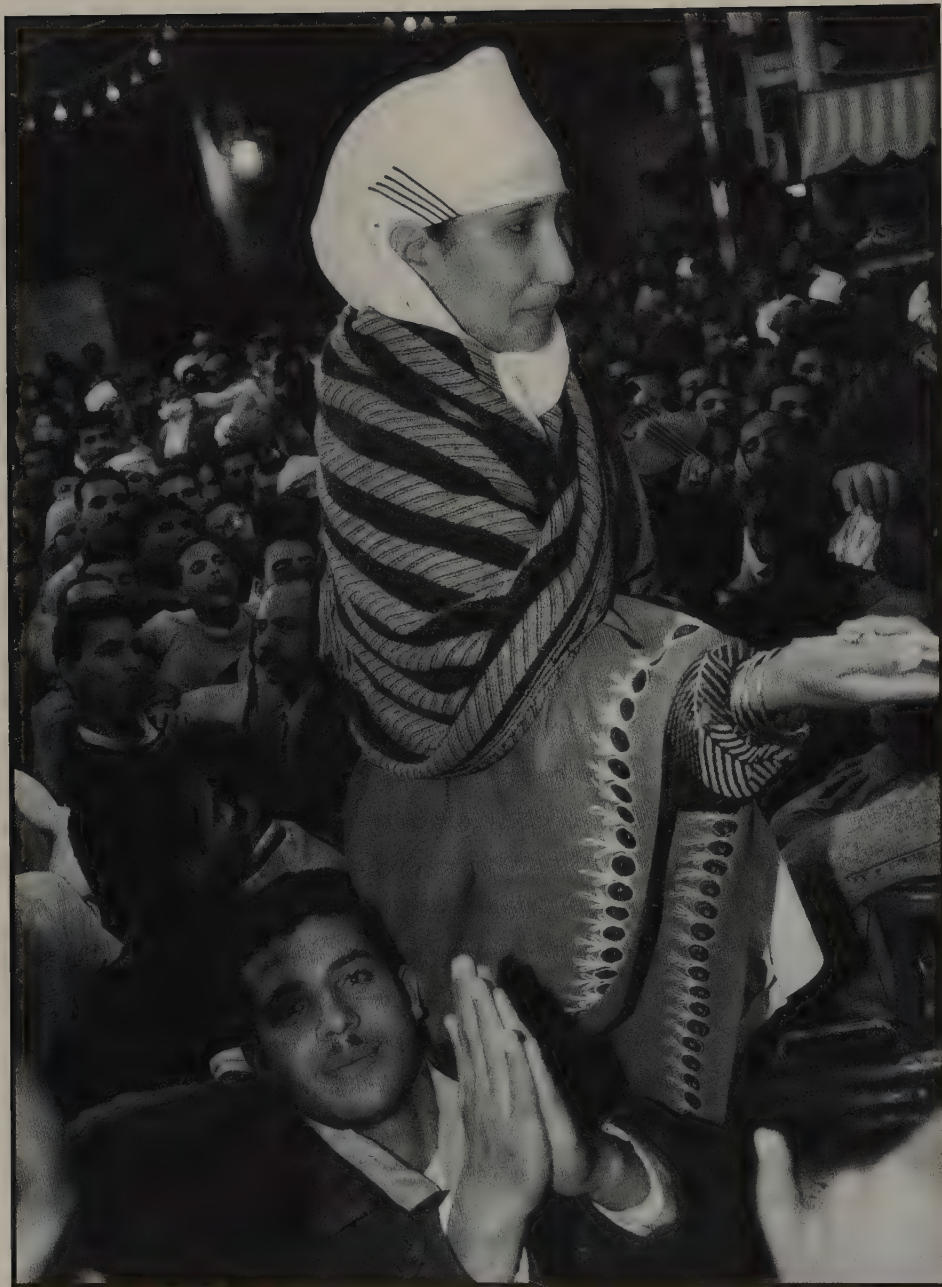
Ramadan nights — al-Hussein



Sayyida Zeinab *mulid*



The master of ceremonies — Sayyida Zeinab *mulid*



Shaabi Singer — Sayyida Zeinab mulid



The big wheel — Sayyida Zeinab *mulid*

Downtown Traffic

*... new attitudes—and reactions to these attitudes—also spread,
all searching for a place amid the trouble and tumult,
between authenticity and modernity.*

L'Egypte: impérialisme et révolution, Jacques Berque



Opera Square



Rush hour



Taxis



Cinema — Emad al-Din Street



Daily news — Talaat Harb Street



Virtual images



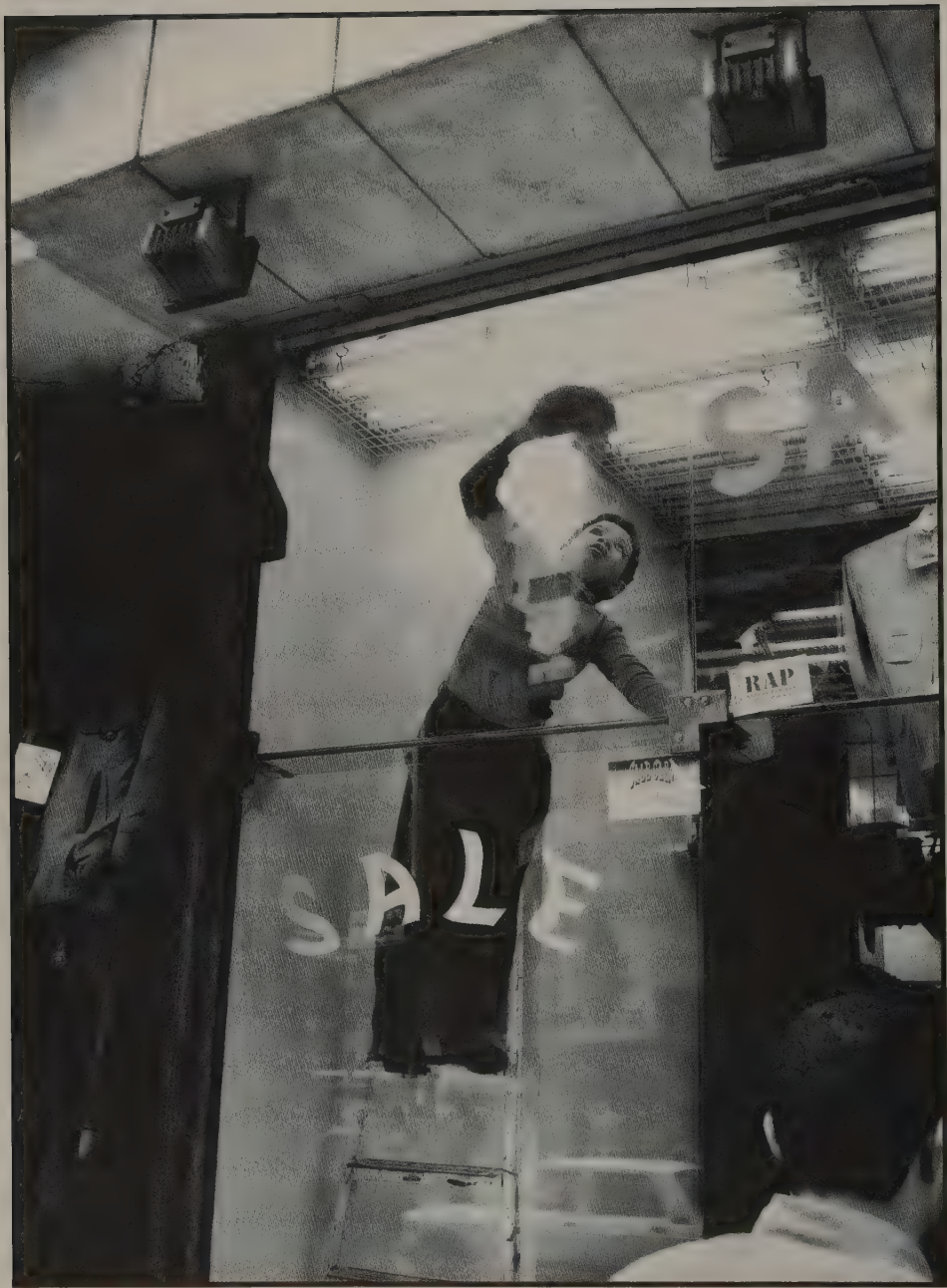
Talaat Harb Street



Sadat underground station



The shoe-shiner — Talaat Harb Square



The shop-window cleaner — Downtown



Bab al-Luq café



Traffic jam — Dokki



Port Said Street



Waiting — Shubra



Sidewalk — Downtown



Ramses Square



Flyover, Ramses Square

Romantic Landscapes

Once the rather exclusive domain of the “colonial” foreigner and the francophilic Egyptian elite, this zone has obviously undergone a dramatic transformation since the Revolution of 1952.

Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious, Janet L. Abu-Lughod



Lion of Qasr al-Nil Bridge



The Gezira Club



Champollion's house — Downtown



Garden of the Marriott Hotel



The Mahmoud Khalil Villa, Zamalek



Heliopolis





Saad Zaghlul Square



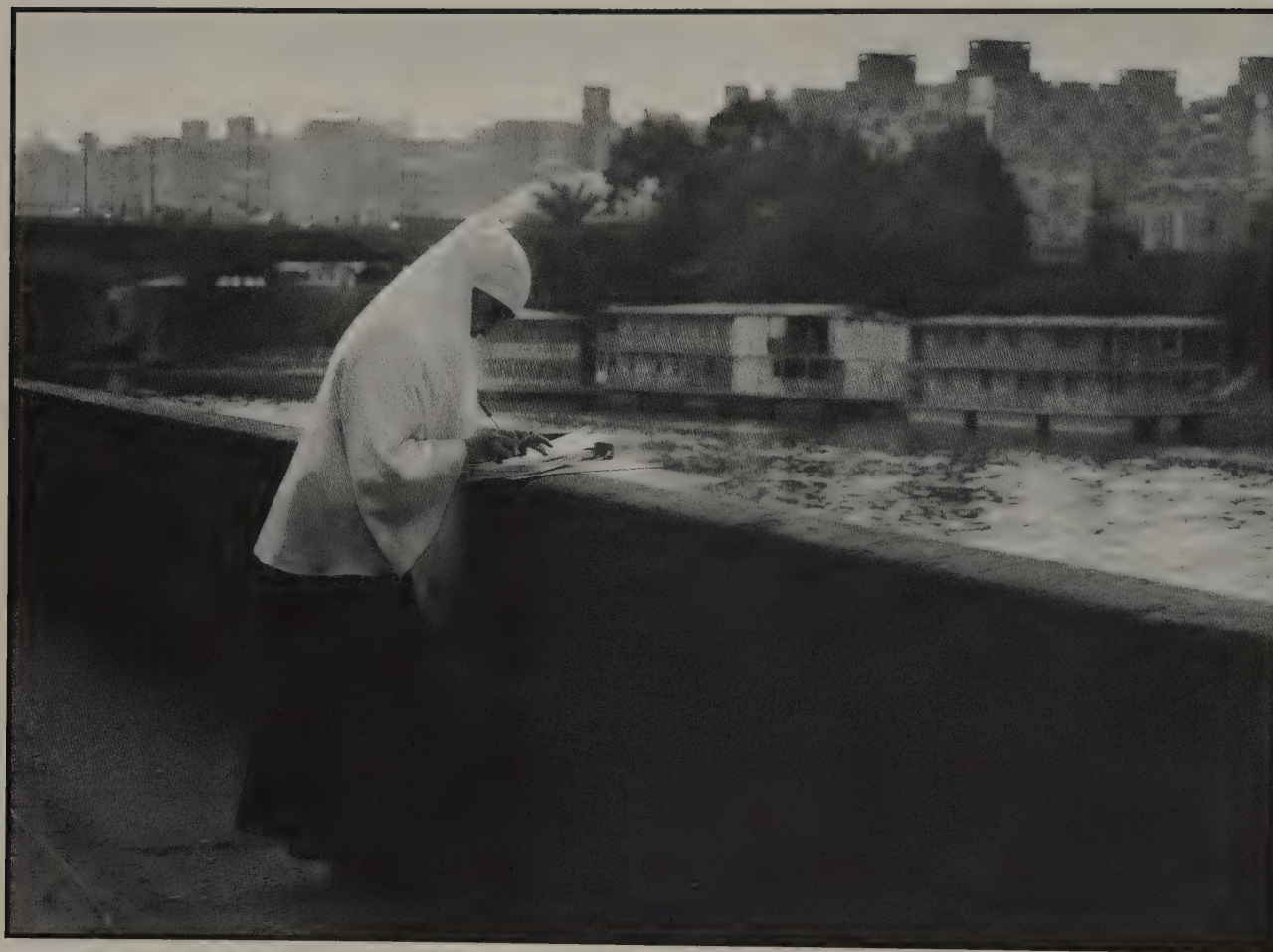
The crossing — Qasr al-Nil Bridge



The Nile Corniche



Baladi bread — Abu'l-Ela Bridge



Postscript — Zamalek



Nile fishermen

Modern Times

I walked aimlessly down the streets looking at passers-by, shop windows, entrances to buildings Everywhere there was a spectacle of people fascinated by the race for happiness and wealth.

al-Lagna, Sonallah Ibrahim



The new citadels — Bulaq



Rock'n'roll attitude — Gezira



McDonald's — Mohandiseen



Arab League Avenue — Mohandiseen



Home delivery — Bab al-luq



Mercedes



6th October Bridge



Satellite Dish



The funfair — Mohandiseen



“Hawaii” ice cream — Mohandiseen





Fustat plateau



Informal housing area



The edge of the city — Fustat plateau



New cities — Fustat plateau



Cairo–Alexandria desert road



Advertising — Cairo—Alexandria desert road



Saqqara dog



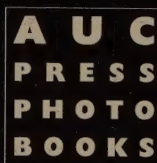
Pyramid of Khafre — Giza

Cairo

From Edge to Edge

The Mother of the World as seen through the lens of French photographer Jean Pierre Ribière and the pen of Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim. The result is a rich and highly original portrait of a city. Ribière's seventy powerful photographs capture fugitive moments in urban life and architecture, in which historic grandeur meets modernity in a race with time. Meanwhile, Sonallah Ibrahim's incisive exploration of Cairo's past and his own past reveals a man living on the edge of a city living on the edge of itself.

Sonallah Ibrahim, born in Cairo, has written a number of novels and short stories, a collection of which has been translated into English and published as *The Smell of It*. Jean Pierre Ribière was born in Paris and has exhibited in France, England, Egypt, and Sudan. *Sudan: The Passing of Time* was his first book of photographs.



The American University in Cairo Press

